

An Outline of Critical Self-Theory

& the non-ideological critique of ideology

Critical self-theory is intentionally presuppositionless, non-ideological theory. It is, most broadly, consciously or critically thinking for oneself.

It includes the set of all non-ideological critiques of ideology. As such, it is the only consistently self-critical and non-self-alienating form of theory—including critical theory. By default it is a libertarian or anarchistic theory: it begins from outside any and all ideological premises, and by definition from each of our own lived experiences in opposition to every form of dependency or enslavement—that is, in opposition to every self-alienating form of institutional or ideological submission.

Jason McQuinn

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fore, for each of us—to the extent that we *do* refuse ideology—also our own non-ideological theory and critique of everyday life, just as it includes the entire set of non-ideological critiques of each of our own everyday lives. Through it we make no pretense to any final religious, metaphysical or scientific universality. There is no need to do so, since it applies first and always to our own lives (including our relations with others) in order to express anything and everything that we each understand and know, including the implicit limits of our understanding and symbolic knowledge. Critical self-theory is a type of consciously practical (instrumental) activity and thus has no goal of its own outside of how we each choose to use it or not. It makes no demands on us—whether religious, metaphysical, moral or ideological—since it is our own situated, critical thinking about our world, through which we refuse pretense to anything else. Because it begins from our own everyday, non-conceptual lives as their expressions, it can be used to facilitate our rebellion against every possible form of fixed ideology or institutional domination and exploitation. It is thus the most consistent form of conscious resistance to the ideological foundations of the ubiquitous institutions of modern slavery—upon which modern civilization is always founded, both historically and organizationally. And, as such, it can also facilitate our self-liberation from all the institutions of that enslavement: the libera-

tion of our thinking, our activities and our relationships, each on our own terms in our own manner to whatever extent we have and use our own powers with and without others.

Self-theory is, most broadly, thinking for oneself—though not necessarily consciously or critically. At the most fundamental levels each of us can experience our world practically from only one possible perspective—for each of us our *own perspective*, shaped through our own inalienable, embodied sensation-and-movement-in-our-world. These fundamental levels of practical experience are always present, though rarely themselves a focus of observation or discussion. Yet even within these most fundamental levels of experience, a primitive sort of theory already exists prior to the development and use of explicitly symbolic systems like languages. In fact, all explicitly symbolic systems rest upon these levels of tacit, preconceptual, experiential understanding.

When we move to the level of symbolic systems, there are *two* possible perspectives through which we can view or portray our world *theoretically*. The first would be, once again, for each of us through our *own*, embodied, personally lived, firstperson perspective. The second—though it could be considered and labeled a number of different ways—we can most simply classify as any other *imagined* perspective, whether we imagine it as seeming to actually exist somewhere in time and space, or instead as something purely

fictional existing outside of our own lives and worlds, but nowhere specific at all. Imagined perspectives can include anything and everything from those of our own selves construed as objects (in our self-reflection or self-consciousness) or those of other people, to those of spirits or gods or those of grand abstractions like Nature or Society, to those of particular groups or organizations. The most important aspect of the relationship of people's *self-theories* to *theories focused on imaginary perspectives* is the necessity for the latter to always rest on the foundation of the former—and never vice versa, because all imagined perspectives must be constructed from our own original, lived perspectives.

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Anatomy of self-theory

Self-theory is the theoretical moment of our self-activity, and our self-activity is the self-creation of our lives. At the pre-symbolic level, our self-theory can be seen as higher level organismic functioning that involves complex adaptation and organization of perceptual-motor abilities (including communicative efforts) to live in our world (our natural and social life context).

Theory and language

We often only speak of theory as existing once symbolic systems exist in which it can be independently embodied, even though—as we have seen—something very like theory, which we might then call “pre-

theory” or “the pre-theoretical,” must also exist—as the base upon which the constructions of symbolically embodied theory can be constructed. This all depends upon our definitions and understandings of the nature of concepts and their relationship to symbols and language. But regardless of where we might want to draw distinctions here, it is abundantly clear that most of what is commonly called “theory” is directly dependent for its existence on language systems. This makes our understanding of the nature and development of language-use a central part of our understanding and critique of theory. Just as critical self-theory is based on the conscious use of theory—considered as a purely human, self-constructed set of techniques, it is also based on our similar understanding of language-use.

Recognition and reification

At the dividing point between every self-theory and imagined theory are choices that we continuously make. From a consciously critical perspective these decisions are not objectively evaluable as right or wrong, true or false, rational or irrational. They are instead basic existential choices reflecting each of our own attitudes towards our lives and worlds, just as our attitudes in turn reflect the history of our manifold choices. Through these choices we determine to what extent we prefer to navigate our worlds through recognition (practical understanding through interaction and dialogue) or

reification (indirect, reified modes of recognition). There may be reasons that we can give or discover for which of these we choose in any particular instance, but whichever we choose remains an existential choice in the social and historical processes of our self-creation.

Recognition is the self-creative process through which we discover our worlds—and, especially, ourselves and other beings as autonomous agents in our worlds. It includes every aspect or moment of our interactions with everything with which we interact. It describes the dialogic process of understanding we undergo in each of our encounters, in which we learn the extent of our own powers and the powers of objects, including the extent of their abilities to act intentionally. There is no guarantee that any given human being will ever recognize him or herself or others, given the possible failure of this developmental process through accident, death or disease. But some form of recognition of the agency of other persons is necessary for any form of social life, and otherwise healthy infants already begin the process of personal recognition (especially voice recognition) even before birth and vastly expand their powers of recognition upon birth. Recognition requires at its most basic level the direct or indirect encounter and perceptual-motor engagement with an object. As such, recognition in its entirety can be seen as coterminous with life-experience itself (and we can imagine this as being the case down to the simplest forms of life like prokaryotes or even viruses). Beyond

basic recognition of relatively inanimate objects, it also extends to animate, living objects: ourselves and other living beings, who are distinguished from the relatively inanimate world by some degree of autonomous agency. Although none of us can directly experience the autonomous agency of another (or we would then *be* that other), we all have the power to recognize our own agency and the agencies of others in our day to day interactions over our lifetimes. We recognize our own agency directly—through our experience of our own interactions with others—and others' agencies indirectly through those same interactions by constructing them imaginatively and reflectively by analogy with our direct experiences.

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Reification is the interactive process through which we can reduce our full experience of recognition in some way in order to make it more abstract or passive, less intense or direct, or interpret it as less real by rationalizing (conceptually fixing or hypostatizing) one or more aspects of the experience. Rationalizing reification involves *choosing* a reductionist, selfalienating (disowned) mode of recognition rather than a wider, non-reductionist, non-self-alienating (owned or self-responsible) mode. Although it is rarely analyzed, the process of rationalizing reification necessarily (analytically) includes two correlative moments (mirroring the two central moments into which our life-experience is generally analyzed, the objective and the subjective): a reductive moment and an

animative moment. This is because it is precisely our life-experience that is reified, and our life experience can always be described in terms of subjective and objective sides, aspects or moments. On the one side an activity is *reduced* to a passive object, and on the other side the activity that is removed from the then passively-constructed object is projected onto a *symbolic agent*. The two great archetypal models for reification in practice are slavery and religion: *slaves* and *spirits*. By *reducing* the actual agency of humans, other living beings, or natural objects of our experience to the status of slaves, symbolic agents are created—from that newly appropriated agency—in the form of imagined statuses, fetishes or spirits (the imagined *status* of slave owner, the imagined sanction of slave-ownership by gods, or the imagined granting of slave-ownership by law, for example) or institutions (imagined, symbolic group spirits). Reification can be employed consciously or not. As long as it is deployed for a particular purpose with awareness of its limitations as a truncated form of recognition (that it is an imaginary, conceptually-mediated process), it can allow people to take particular behaviors largely for granted under certain conditions and contexts, allowing people to focus their practical activity and consciousness on other more significant areas. However, when it becomes habitual—through repeated obsessive-compulsive or compulsory submissive behavior—and no longer consciously purposeful, reified forms of recognition can be mistaken

for fully-attentive recognition and this can lead people to begin believing that the reifications are more “real” than the evidence of their own senses—especially when forms of reification are reinforced by largescale institutional systems of ideology, coercion, exploitation and enslavement. Given how completely essential reification has become for ensuring the voluntarily submissive behavior required for the maintenance of all the institutions of modern slavery, there is now hardly any aspect of contemporary life left untouched. With habitual reification nearly everywhere, examples abound. Pick any aspect of life where forced labor, domination, mass culture or ideology is found (pretty much anywhere) and reification will be right there in the center of things helping glue it all together.

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Heteronomous theory and ideology

Heteronomous theory is, most broadly, thinking for oneself through submission to theories centered somewhere else besides one’s own life (on imagined, often symbolic, agents)—through the self-alienation (disowning) of one’s perspective. Heteronomous theory is another name for ideological theory (in the most generally *critical* sense of the word “ideology”). The descriptor “heteronomous” denotes “subjection to something else” or “subject to a law or standard external to itself.”⁹ “Ideology,” on the other hand, originally comes from its use by Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1796) as a term for the study or science of

ideas. However, it is an extremely contested word, meaning that different people use it in widely different ways for vastly different reasons. It first acquired its enduring negative connotation through Napoleon's condemnation of "the ideologues" of the French Convention (including de Tracy) who opposed his edicts. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels then popularized (mostly) critical forms of the concept that continue to be primary influences on its uses today.¹⁰ During its long history, the major struggle has been between positive (or neutral) and negative (or critical) conceptions and uses of the term. It will here be used in its most general critical form to refer to *imposed idea systems* (heteronomous theory) in contradistinction to autonomous use of ideas (autonomous—or self—theory). The entire organizational structure of modern civilization is fundamentally reliant on the free and unquestioned functioning of a multitude of competing and cooperating heteronomous theories and the reifications on which they are built. This fact is a central part of the ultimate public secret of the modern world. The secret that cannot ever officially be named for what it is: *modern slavery*. At the heart of modern slavery, at the heart of every institutionalization of the enslavement of human beings in modern society, is the transubstantiation (reification) of life through the self-alienation and appropriation of agency (people's self-reduction to passive objects submitting to imagined symbolic statuses or agents). To *be* a slave

(as opposed to being captured and continuing to consciously resist one's captor) is in practice to *identify oneself* as a slave (under whatever name) and to accept the control of one's activities by those who have appropriated one's self-alienated agency. The function of every ideology—from religions to liberalism, from nationalisms to Marxism or even libertarianism—is to symbolically formulate this transubstantiation of life in relatively fixed dogmas that sugarcoat the required submissive and self-reductive moments. And, for this transubstantiation of life to be effective, any genuine self-understanding of the existence and nature of self-theory and heteronomous theory, the self-alienation of agency, or their places in the ubiquitous social constitution of institutions of modern slavery must be suppressed by all those who participate in the maintenance and reproduction of these institutions.

Anatomy of heteronomous theory

If *self*-theory is the theoretical moment of our *self*-activity, and our *self*-activity is the *self*-creation of our lives, *heteronomous* (or ideological) theory is the theoretical moment of our *selfalienated* activity, or the *self-alienation* of our *self*-theory. Once people develop complex, socially-interactive cognitive abilities to richly *imagine* (reconstruct, or *recognize*) other perspectives that other people (and other nonhuman living beings) appear to hold analogous to their own, it becomes a much easier step to further *imagine* that one is beholden

to other, more speculatively constructed, fetishized statuses or beings. The beginnings of complex symbolic communication through development of languages must have sooner or later led to the prehistoric *imaginative recognition* of not only human kin, but animal and plant kin, and even kinship with natural objects, materials and land- and water-forms (rivers, lakes, valleys, mountains). But, eventually, this sensible, understandable and in many ways very useful animist consciousness had to have extended beyond everyday sensory interactions to more tenuously *imagined* encounters (influenced by dreams and altered forms of consciousness) with *living-dead* ancestors, ghosts, nature spirits and eventually gods. As long as each of these *imagined* perspectives remained useful or enjoyable as finite, speculative constructions in story-telling and primitive attempts at empirical natural explanation their animism did not require self-alienation. But it was with the birth of religion—in the sense of *fixed belief* in the extra- or supernatural *reality* of such entities—that self alienation on a cognitive level initially appears to have taken hold. With the birth of religion people abandoned their own personal and immediately communitarian uses of their conceptual creations and instead *imagined* that some self-alienated conceptual creations were even more real than their own lives. It is this inside-out relation of conceptual creations over their human creators that defines conceptual self-alienation and heteronomous or ideological theory. Everything that was once relatively

simple, is made highly complex, convoluted, and more difficult by the felt necessity to make an alien perspective the center of one's conceptual theory, which also means that to maintain the integrity of one's ideology, one will submit to the orders of those who successfully claim to represent and control that imagined center. Believers in ideologies have placed rings in their own noses, and have announced that they want to be led by those who have claimed the proper ideological authority to represent their self-alienated agency.

Primitive, ancient, and modern slavery

It should at least seem curious, though not necessarily unexpected, that there is little or no research and investigation of the generally concomitant development of institutions of enslavement and civilizations. After all, the representatives (leaders, servants, lackeys, etc.) Of civilized institutions have many reasons to hide the embarrassing fact that for the most part civilization has just been another word for societies employing slave labor (forced labor). Nor is there much significant research on the historical *continuities* of the various forms of enslaving institutions—especially when it comes to the transition from indentured, chattel, bond and related forms of slavery to the very *unfree* “free labor” and “democratic” institutions of the enlightened, modern age of wage, debt and prison slavery. Even among libertarians, who are often quick to attack the nation state for its manifold crimes, there is most

often a knee-jerk identification with the myths of civilization—in which it is always portrayed in glowing, ethereal terms, no matter how dismal and disgusting the facts on the ground *always are*. The fact that no civilization—now or historically—has ever existed without an *extensive* foundation built on dispossession, forced labor and plunder imposed upon the majority of its population is easily documentable, but rarely mentioned.

Engendered resistance to slavery

But just because we can fairly and accurately construct world history since the end of the Paleolithic in terms of the proliferation of progressively more sophisticated institutions of enslavement, does not mean that the path has been without difficulties for the slavers. At each stage of the way people have resisted to the best of their abilities, granted that their abilities have also waned as their kinship bands, self-sufficient life ways, connections with the land, and non-ideological self-understandings have been undermined and destroyed.

Critical theory: The development of immanent critique

Most broadly, critical theory can be considered the theoretical moment of any and all forms of resistance to enslavement. From its beginnings, critical theory has had two defining moments: a goal of practical *autonomy*

and a method of *immanent critique* (critique from within rather than from outside). The pre-history and history of self-organized resistance to heteronomous institutions of slavery is largely unrecorded. This is because most early forms of self-organized resistance have been orally-based and not textually-based, simply as a reflection of the fact that inscribed symbolic systems were largely developed and primarily employed by participants in the institution and maintenance of slave systems until modern times. Therefore, the recorded history of *critique* (in the very broadest sense) largely begins with the questioning of religion *from within* these same circles by religious believers who were trained in the use of these symbolic systems. Historically, since religious texts (stories, poems, sayings) were among the first to describe formal doctrines, they were also among the first to both be criticized by—and include criticisms of—doctrinal rivals. In the west, *formal critique* in philosophy was eventually pioneered especially by the ancient Greeks and Romans, but otherwise elsewhere largely developed through the doctrinal disputes between and within religious factions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. *Transcendental arguments*—criticisms from outside, arguments from external dogma or a claimed superior standpoint—were often the dominant form of traditional, theological criticism, as proponents of religious hierarchies and religious revelations fought between themselves to proclaim *the revealed Truth* against all uncivilized heretical or pagan deviations or

rivals. However, within Christian doctrines themselves, the *immanent* divinity of the doctrine's man-god—God's son incarnated as man—was proclaimed within the larger transcendental division between humans and God. And the influence of this doctrinal *immanence within transcendence* eventually contributed throughout Europe to the increasingly successful rebellions of millenarian heretics and Protestant factions against the Roman church, based on forms of *immanent critique* made through direct interpretations of the Bible that dispensed with the Roman hierarchy.

Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, among the many other Protestant critics and millenarian heretics, remain the unacknowledged popularizers of immanent critique, which became the core method of all modern critical theories. Modern forms of *immanent critique* thus developed both within traditional Christianity and within the critical thought of Enlightenment philosophers and the Romantics—many themselves heavily influenced by Protestant and millenarian themes, from Rousseau and Kant, through Hegel and the post-Hegelians, Feuerbach, Bauer, Stirner, and Marx. And Marx's philosophical writings (along with his political economic writings) became the bases for Georg Lukács' phenomenological Marxism, Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge, and the Frankfurt School's own incarnation of “critical theory.” During and since this time, *critical theory* has become synonymous with an ever widening range of particular critiques of alien-

ation and domination. By the late 20th century these critiques expanded especially into identity studies (race, gender, etc.), cultural studies, environmental studies and post-structuralism, including post-Marxism.

Critical theory: Reclaiming autonomy

Modern *critical* theory began largely as an Enlightenment project of reclaiming personal autonomy on the heels of the Protestant Reformation, the beginnings of mass literacy, the scientific revolution and the industrial revolution. It championed critique of traditional religion (primarily that of the Christianity of the Roman church) and the medieval social forms (monarchical feudalism) within which it was embedded. As the Enlightenment progressed and its contradictions became more visible, *critical* theorists turned increasingly towards self-reflection, self-criticism and social criticism. With the earth-shaking (though mixed) successes of the English, American and, especially, French and Haitian revolutions in destroying many pillars of the old order and beginning the consolidation of a new capitalist order of nation-states, *critical* theory became increasingly identified with the rise in consciousness of those excluded from power in the modern regimes. What all varieties of *critical* theory share is a commitment to some form of *autonomy* (refusal of enslavement) coupled with an attempt at *immanent critique* of religion, philosophy and other forms of ideology that can help ground practical resistance to varying concep-

tions of alienation and institutional domination—although many recent forms of critical theory have been retreating toward relatively pessimistic and increasingly impotent ironic or nihilistic positions.

The commitment to autonomous or self-conscious activity was most famously formulated by Immanuel Kant in “An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?” (1784) There Kant argued that enlightenment meant overcoming immaturity by using “one’s own understanding without the guidance of another.” According to Kant autonomy is following laws that one agrees to give oneself according only to the dictates of (universal) Reason, since for Kant every other source of law is “heteronomous.” For Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, historicizing Kant’s perspective, subjective autonomy must be situated and actualized only through the process of identifying with the (rational) substance of one’s developing social totality. For Ludwig Feuerbach, criticizing Hegel from a perspective of a sensuously materialist humanism (on his way to naturalism), autonomy is the human individual as constituting species-being. While for Bruno Bauer it is only the critical critic, who has integrated his particular interests into the historically developing rational universality who is truly autonomous. And for Karl Marx any genuine autonomy under capitalism is relegated only to species-being divided into class organizations or, alternatively, to abstract individuals expressing their roles as class-conscious species-beings. Actual flesh-and-

blood human beings conscious of their own lives and relationships while expressing ideas, values and goals of their own need not apply. According to Marxist dogma they are merely abstractions, because they don't acknowledge their properly assigned places in the historical unfolding of dialectical Reason!

Heteronomous critical theory

Heteronomous *critical* theory is *critical* theory in the service of heteronomous “autonomy”—or in the service of heteronomous agency dressed in symbolically “autonomous” clothes. The defining difference between genuinely critical *self*-theory and everything else that has traditionally gone by the name of “critical theory” consists in the unyieldingly persistent assertion of *actually-lived autonomy* and refusal of submission to *any* form of heteronomy—any form of determination by external imposition—within critical *self*-theory. All other (heteronomous) critical theory asserts forms of *merely supposed* autonomy that are actually heteronomous substitutes for my *actual* autonomy, your *actual* autonomy and our *actual* autonomy. And these ersatz, reified forms of autonomy are then employed in recuperative, short-circuited forms of immanent critique, which deny *actually-lived* autonomy in favor of self-alienated forms meant to serve real or imagined heteronomous agents. All critical theory that is not consistently critical *self*-theory then consists in critiques of particular forms of enslavement merely in

order to substitute other forms of enslavement rather than to *abolish all enslavement*. This is a lesson we should already have learned from religious conflicts, where the object is never to reclaim our actually-lived autonomy, but to substitute one form of religious self-alienation for another. Ultimately, just as all religions are forms of heteronomous theory, all recuperative critical theories are also forms of heteronomous theory. But whereas traditional religions and premodern theories are usually oriented towards the defense of earlier forms of enslavement, heteronomous critical theories are always oriented towards the defense of forms of *modern slavery*, and most often towards supposedly ever “freer,” more “progressive,” forms of modern slavery. This means that nearly every heteronomous critical theory is connected—either implicitly or explicitly—to leftist political-economic theories based in the liberal tradition of the French Revolution. There the formal differences of capitalist liberalism were institutionalized in the seating arrangements of the National Assembly, where those supporting traditional, monarchical-feudal forms of order sat on the right side of the speaker and those advocating radically reformist measures sat on the left.

Critical theory: Marxist social theory

Marxist ideologies have constituted a wide range of the most dominant and successful forms of heteronomous critical theory. Karl Marx (along with his side-

kick and funder Friedrich Engels) managed to construct a theoretical system claiming the best of multiple worlds that thereby appealed to several distinct groups, from working-class activists and liberal reformists to displaced intellectuals and would-be bureaucrats of socialism. Even a large number of pro-revolutionary radicals have attempted to employ Marxist means in multiple countries over the last century and a half. The primary promise of Marxist ideology has been the completion and fulfillment of the supposedly implicit goals of the bourgeois revolutions—in the case of the French Revolution, for example, the goals of liberty, equality and fraternity—through the progressive, capitalist development of the productive forces of the economy. Onto this was grafted a secondary theme of the realization of a relatively undefined—but rationalized—utopian communism that would supposedly coincide with or immediately follow the realization of bourgeois capitalist technological development, allowing mature capitalism to then be consciously redirected to progressive human social development. Best of all for displaced intellectuals, Marxism provided the rationale for intellectual direction of working class organizations and parties, since deployment of the dialectical Hegelian philosophical categories of historical materialism (to “realize” philosophy or Reason in society or history) translated into the (pseudo-) scientific language of a simultaneously realist and utopian political-economic doctrine would be a bit much for

your average, everyday non-intellectual to be expected to understand or master.

It was in the years following the successful coup d'état of the Bolsheviks over the socialist Provisional Government followed by its takeover of the councils (Soviets) in Russia, and following the defeat of German council communist tendencies by an alliance of the much larger Social Democratic Party (SPD) with the military in Germany, that the Institute for Social Research (ISR, better known in the US as the Frankfurt School) was founded. Despite the clear and consistent emancipatory failures (mostly disasters) of Marxist ideologies in every instance they had attained political power, the Frankfurt School was devoted to an independent program of interdisciplinary academic Marxist research in support of the various Marxist political tendencies. However, with the change of the Institute's directorship from Carl Grünberg to Max Horkheimer in 1930, Grünberg's emphasis on productivist Marxism was replaced with Horkheimer's emphasis on what he called "Critical Theory" in a successful attempt to distance the Institute from Marxist orthodoxies, while opening it up to new influences: Weberian sociology, Husserlian phenomenology, Freudian psychoanalysis, along with re-encounters with Kant's critical philosophy and Hegel's dialectical idealism. However, once again (as with the council communists), the essential Marxist ideological categories and goals were largely retained, leading since to ever more convoluted de-

fenses of the foundational dogmas in order to preserve them (and the self-alienation they require) relatively unchanged.

Postmodern critical theory: Structuralist and poststructuralist ideologies

With the contemporary exhaustion of traditional Marxist ideologies and stagnation of Frankfurt School critical theories, postmodern critical theories have progressively claimed center stage in the recuperative arena. Instead of the line from Kant to Hegel through Feuerbach to Marx and the Frankfurt School, postmodern critical theorists have tended to take a number of lines from Kant and Hegel through Schopenhauer to Nietzsche, or then through Darwin and Brentano to Freud, or through Brentano and Husserl to Heidegger, or often various combinations of any or all of these with or without encounters with strands of Marxist critical theory (as in the post-Marxisms). A central influence shared to some degree by theorists following most of these lines has been a historical movement through structuralism to poststructuralism. Structuralists—like Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Piaget, Althusser, Barthes, Lacan and Foucault—attempted to explain human socio-cultural life in terms of occultly abstract structures—often supposed linguistic structures—that are neither material nor ideal. While post-structuralists—like Althusser, Barthes, Baudrillard, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida,

Butler and Foucault (obviously including many former structuralists)—increasingly questioned certain aspects of structuralist dogmas and reifications, especially the exclusionary, ahistorical, asocial and/or nonembodied nature of many structuralist theories. The large number of directions taken by postmodern or post-structuralist critical theories makes any unitary characterization of their underlying similarities difficult. But they most often share one or another form of reactive critique of structural determinations that still preserves those determinations, merely in some sort of modified, more fluid ways. The glaring excesses of the structuralist reduction of human life to determination by abstract structures has given way to various earnest (or occasionally playful) partial critiques of structure that are often comparable to negative theologies in that they chip away from the outside by describing what *isn't* the case in attempts to indirectly reveal what might still be left. The most widely influential post-structuralist stances belong to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction and Michel Foucault's archeological/genealogical projects.

Ideological critiques of ideology: Recuperation through *critical ideologies*

In a world of near-universal slavery anything but genuinely autonomous, self-directed activity is expected. And this expectation will invariably be expressed in any and every institutionally tolerated form of thought. This includes every tolerated form of

critical thought. To be tolerated each form of critical theory must pledge allegiance at the least to the need for universal enslavement (though rarely in such explicit language—both modern slavers *and* slaves definitely prefer euphemisms). Each form of heteronomous critical theory must include dire warnings against deviating from any path that doesn't obsequiously quaver before the proper universal (or universally anti-universal) abstractions embodied by absolutely necessary hierarchical, bureaucratic institutions. (This goes even for too many self-described anarchists, who cannot conceive of the supposedly-desired absence of the state without also proclaiming the absolute necessity of bureaucratic, [self-]governing bodies to ensure human submission to the needs of society, particular social classes, a socialist economy, political democracy and/ or other unquestionably “necessary” abstractions employed to conceal their underlying hierarchical, institutional assumptions.) Each form of tolerated thought, critical or not, must demonstrate a commitment to universal slavery by expressing identification with it in one or another predictable form. Most of these forms of identification with universal (or universally dispersed) slavery—in these modern (or post-modern), enlightened times—will themselves be characterized as modes of freedom, self-realization, self-determination, or other highly deceptive conceptions. Let's face it, slavery itself is a hard sell.

Slave theory: Religion, philosophy, and ideology

We live in a shared social world in which slavery (systematic relations of domination and submission) is a taken-for-granted fact of life that is enforced and reinforced at every turn in every institution of modern civilization. But in modern everyday discourse slavery has become invisible, except as a marginalized concept applicable only to the very worst instances of enslavement in other times, other places or the furthest reaches of today's criminal underworld. The deliberate and pervasive construction of the invisibility of modern slavery in everyday life has proven the most effective and enduring strategy for maintaining the existence of enslaving institutions to the extent that it defines the modern social era.

Ultimately, every form of ideology or heteronomous thought *is* self-alienation in the realm of conceptual thought, and this conceptual self-alienation is a reflection in theory of the self-alienation that is a predictable result of every institutional practice of modern slavery in a world of slaves and commodities—and their respective prices. However, this self-alienation is not the reified, abstract alienation of theology, philosophy or social ideologies, in which a reified subjectivity is conceived as being alienated from some sort of larger, more objective abstraction like god or spirit, society, species-being, reason, etc. It is simply the *self*-alienation involved in each person choosing to refuse responsibility for his or her life-activities and to instead carve

out some tiny area of privately-claimed—but relatively impotent—subjectivity, while submitting to (and thus attributing his or her actions to) one or many outside, occult force(s).

**The reversal of perspective:
From self-alienating heteronomy to lived
autonomy**

Radically *reversing* perspective returns an inside-out, heteronomously-constructed world to its one and only actually lived perspective: *my* perspective for me, *your* perspective for you and each of *our own particular, inalienable* perspectives for each and all of us. The radical *reversal* of perspective of critical self-theory is then, not any sort of change of one approach to this kind of separation to another approach from another side (as from geocentric to heliocentric, or even from objective transcendence to transcendental subjectivity). *It is the refusal of any and all separations of any part of myself from myself.*

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This is a short version of an extensive essay that will appear in full in issue #3 of *Modern Slavery* journal. “Critical Self-Theory” provides the basis for the description and use of a consistently nonideological critical theory, an anarchist critical theory that can provide the missing basis for a much more coherent alternative to the heretofore dominant proliferation of ideological anarchisms.
